

## Using metalinguistic terminology in teaching grammar to older children

Alekasandra Wach (Adam Mickiewicz University)

The term 'metalanguage' is defined and understood in different ways. Johnson and Johnson (1998:212) call it 'language about language', Borg (1998:159) understands it as 'meta-talk', or 'explicit talk about grammar'. It is generally contended that metalanguage is used primarily to talk about grammar, though many researchers admit its other uses as well. According to Berry (2004:2), the term 'metalanguage' should not be limited to denote just linguistic terminology, though many researches and numerous sources use the two terms interchangeably, since terminology is "the most obvious manifestation of metalanguage".

Until recently, metalanguage used to be a neglected area of applied linguistics research. Nowadays, the position of grammar instruction in second and foreign language teaching has started to change. More and more teachers and researchers notice that the practice of communicative language teaching may not contribute significantly to the development of the linguistic competence. In fact, explicit focus on grammar, at least to a certain extent, has been advocated as conducive to a more effective acquisition of structures. Numerous studies show that 'focus on form' or 'input enhancement techniques', conducted during the course of a communicative lesson, yield positive effects on learning outcomes. Together with these findings, interest in various aspects of grammar teaching, including using metalanguage by teachers and learners, has been evoked.

Different aspects of metalanguage have been studied so far. Berry (2004) investigated its use by writers of grammars of English and learners' awareness of it. Basturkmen *et al.* (2002) looked at the kind of metalinguistic terms used by adult learners and teachers and at the relationship between the use of these terms and the level of learner uptake. Borg (1998) studied the role of metalanguage used by teachers and the factors influencing its use.

The present paper will aim at presenting the concept of metalanguage in foreign language teaching, focusing on the state-of-the-art research on the notion and briefly discussing some underlying issues, such as the role of consciousness in attending to input (e.g. Schmidt 1990) or the distinction between implicit and explicit teaching of grammar.

In the second part of the paper, the findings of a small-scale semi-structured interview study, conducted on a group of teachers, will be presented and discussed. The study will concentrate on using metalinguistic terminology in teaching grammar to older children, for the sake of this research defined as children aged 10-12, 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> primary school graders. The choice of this particular age group is deliberate and has stemmed from the fact that it is generally a problematic group in language didactics. Older children are at a transitory stage between childhood and adolescence, probably manifesting the strengths and weaknesses of both. The degree and role of explicit instruction in teaching this age group raises a number of pertinent questions: Are children at this age ready for the amount of abstraction inevitably present in explicit grammar teaching? Does their knowledge of metalanguage in L1 allow introducing it in L2? Although the study does not aim at solving these uncertainties, it focuses at establishing whether and to what extent teachers use metalinguistic terminology in teaching grammar to this age group. The findings may also cast a light on the teachers' awareness of metalanguage and their attitudes toward using it.

### References

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